

## ZAGREB IN THE NETWORK OF EUROPEAN CITIES

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### **Abstract**

This work deals with the importance of the city of Zagreb within the European framework. Demographic growth in Zagreb and other larger European cities, especially those in the wider region, is compared. Zagreb's position at the point of contact between Central and Southeastern Europe is analyzed, particularly under conditions of European integration. Finally, the importance of Zagreb and its urban region at the national level is considered.

**Key words:** Zagreb, European cities, Central Europe, Southeastern Europe, Croatia, population, transit-geographic position, Zagreb urban region

## ZAGREB V OMREŽJU EVROPSKIH MEST

### **Izvleček**

Članek prikazuje pomembnost Zagreba v okviru evropskih mest. Prikazana je primerjava demografskega razvoja Zagreba in drugih večjih evropskih mest. Analiziran je tudi položaj Zagreba na stiku Srednje in Jugovzhodne Evrope, še posebej v procesu evropske integracije. Predstavljen pa je tudi pomen Zagreba in njegove urbane regije na nacionalni ravni.

**Ključne besede:** Zagreb, evropska mesta, Srednja Evropa, Jugovzhodna Evropa, Hrvaška, prebivalstvo, prometni položaj, Zagrebška urbana regija.

## INTRODUCTION

Although it has an urban tradition spanning over 750 years (the Zagreb diocese was established in 1094, while it acquired the status of a free royal borough in 1242), until the beginning of the twentieth century Zagreb was a small city that only grew in the shadow of larger and more important neighboring cities within the state formations of which it was a part. Therefore Croatia's urban system, which lost its independence in 1102, and reacquired it only in 1991, did not develop independently but rather as a sub-system under Austria or Austro-Hungary in its interior, and under Venice in its coastal littoral. Since Croatia was in the peripheries of these states, there were no important cities in it, with the exception of certain coastal towns that developed as major ports, such as Pula or Rijeka. In the interior, cities were usually small and functionally subordinate to larger centers in neighboring sections of the aforementioned states. These were not only the largest cities, such as Vienna and Budapest, but also smaller ones such as Graz or Trieste (Table 1). Only one hundred years ago, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Graz, Trieste, Brno and Szeged had twice as many residents as Zagreb, while even Debrecen, Plzen, Bratislava, Hodmezövásárhely, Linz and Kecskemét were larger. Furthermore, Zagreb at the time was not much larger than other cities in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, such as Sarajevo (pop. 42,000) or Ljubljana (pop. 37,000) or even other Croatian cities such as Rijeka (pop. 38,000) or Pula (pop. 36,000). With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), developmental conditions changed entirely. Zagreb, which became the new state's secondary center after Belgrade, began to grow and develop rapidly. This continued to the most recent period, so that Zagreb considerably surpassed many of the aforementioned foreign cities. Zagreb is today almost three times larger than Graz, Trieste or Debrecen, almost twice as large as Brno, and one third larger than Bratislava. The population growth index for Zagreb and the remaining cities over this period speaks for itself. Additionally, Zagreb, together with Belgrade, considerably outgrew the cities in neighboring, today independent states, while the difference between Zagreb and other Croatian cities is continuing to grow. Therefore, the altered circumstances of Zagreb's historical and geographic development influenced its rapid growth during the twentieth century, particularly after 1918, when Zagreb became a secondary center and the leading industrial city in the newly-established state. Over the last, roughly fifteen years, within the independent Republic of Croatia, population trends in Zagreb corresponded to overall population trends in Croatia, and to processes of suburbanization or metropolitanization, characteristic of better developed countries. This means that the population of the city itself is declining, even as the population of its urban region, i.e. the wider city environs, is growing. The gap between Zagreb and other Croatian cities is widening. Over the last fourteen years, an urban region has formed around Zagreb that has almost one million residents and 400,000 people actively employed, which is a little over one fifth of the country's population and the same share of its total employed.

*Table 1: Population of select Central European cities at the beginning of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries*

City	Population	Population	Index
	c. 1900 (in 000)	2004 (in 000)	2004/1900
Vienna	1675	1504	89,8
Budapest	717	1730	241,3
Prague	202	1165	576,7
Graz	138	216	156,5
Trieste	134	209	156,0
Brno	110	375	340,9
Szeged	100	163	163,0
Debrecen	72	205	284,7
Plzen	68	164	241,2
Bratislava	62	429	691,9
Hodmezövásárhely	61	48	78,7
Linz	59	185	313,6
Kecskemét	58	107	184,5
Zagreb	58	682	1175,9

Sources: [www.library.uu.nl/wesp/populstat](http://www.library.uu.nl/wesp/populstat)  
[www.gazetteer.de](http://www.gazetteer.de)

## DEMOGRAPHIC GROWTH IN ZAGREB

Zagreb's development is directly correlated to the exploitation of its transit position. The growth in importance of Zagreb's transit hub also signified growth in the city's importance. The construction of the first railroad tracks and the creation of a railroad hub, followed by the appearance of each new form of transportation and each new transit network, meant faster growth for Zagreb (Sić, 1994). In its railroad phase, Zagreb was still a small city which was intersected by several major train routes, and these influenced a degree of physical expansion and economic development. However, given the aforementioned political context within which Zagreb developed at the time and the purpose for the construction of this transit infrastructure, it did not lead to more intense development in the city. Namely, these railroads (Zidani Most-Zagreb-Sisak, 1862, or Budapest-Zagreb-Rijeka, 1873) were constructed with the objective of linking Austria to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Hungary to the northern Croatian Littoral, so that Zagreb at the time did not have the status of a major transportation hub, rather its importance was limited to a stop on larger transit routes. Only the emergence of industry in the late nineteenth century and its heightened growth during the twentieth century—and the associated influx of new residents—had a greater impact on the city's physical enlargement, a process largely dictated by the extension of railroads as the most important overland access routes for entering or departing from the city.

Circumstances changed after the First World War, and Zagreb became one of the most important transportation hubs in the newly-established state. The principal transit axis of the new state (down the Sava River valley) passed through Zagreb, as well as the most important and best link between the inland and littoral sections of Croatia. All of this spurred growth in Zagreb's size and importance. Already in 1921, Zagreb's population surpassed 100,000, which, given that its population was only 16,000 in 1857, meant that it grew seven times in size over a seventy-year period. This growth was undoubtedly due to the new value placed on old transit routes passing through the city, and to accelerated economic growth spurred on by industrial growth. It is with a view to these flexible historical and geographic circumstances that Zagreb's importance in the broader, European context should be considered. Population trends are the best indicators here. With only 16,000 residents in the mid-nineteenth century, Zagreb was not even among Europe's 300 largest cities. In 1900, it held a rank of 236, while by the mid-twentieth century it was ranked at 81, and in 1991 it was among Europe's fifty largest cities (not including Russian cities) (Bertić, 1994). According to estimates made in 2004 ([www.gazetteer.de](http://www.gazetteer.de)), with its population of 682,000, Zagreb has a rank of 56 in Europe (including the Russian cities and Istanbul). Therefore, over the past century and a half, Zagreb went from being a small local town, which had no real major importance in the wider region, into a respectable medium-large city at the point of contact between Central and Southeastern Europe. Today Zagreb has a rank of 25 among European capital cities, while within the framework of Central and Southeastern Europe it ranks ninth overall in terms of size (after Bucharest, Budapest, Vienna, Belgrade, Prague, Munich, Sofia and Athens).

## ZAGREB IN EUROPE'S TRANSIT NETWORK

Zagreb lies at the very heart of Croatia's core region. Its historical and, even more so, contemporary importance is the result of its transit and geographic position as the optimum communication route between the Pannonian and Mediterranean zones. Moreover, its favorable geographic site and position, and the natural openness of its relief have contributed to the emergence of about a dozen important transit routes in the with Zagreb region, some of which have international significance. Zagreb has therefore become a complex transit hub, one of the most important in this part of Europe (Sić, 1994.). Zagreb is traversed by pan-European transit corridor X, which links northwestern Europe with southeastern Europe and southwestern Asia, as well as this corridor's branch Xa (Graz-Maribor-Zagreb) and branch Vb of corridor V (Budapest-Zagreb-Rijeka) which links the western Mediterranean to Eastern Europe.

Zagreb began to develop as a railroad hub during the 1860s (Zidani Most-Zagreb-Sisak rail route in 1862, Zagreb-Karlovac route in 1865, Zákány-Koprivnica-Dugo Selo-Zagreb route in 1870, and so forth), while at the beginning of the 1990s direct international rail (intercity) links were established with the most important capital cities and regional centers in neighboring countries (such as Munich, Vienna or Budapest). Several intercity trains pass

through Zagreb every day. These are the EC Mimara line along the Leipzig-Munich-Salzburg-Ljubljana-Zagreb route; the IC Kras line along the Trieste-Ljubljana-Zagreb route; the IC Croatia line along the Vienna-Maribor-Zagreb route; and the IC Kvarner line on the Budapest-Zagreb-Rijeka route ([www.hznet.hr](http://www.hznet.hr)). Zagreb's growth was given additional impetus during the more recent, automobile era and the construction of modern roads, particularly since 1972, when a highway network began to appear around Zagreb. This process has been particularly marked over the last several years, as highway construction reached its peak, so that today Zagreb is surrounded by a relatively dense network of highways that facilitate ties not only within Croatia, but also with neighboring countries. These highways have direct links to already-constructed highways in neighboring countries, whereby Zagreb's position within the international framework has been improved considerably.

Zagreb was incorporated in international air traffic in the 1960s. Although Zagreb's airport does not correspond to the quality of better European airports (it can be most closely compared to Ljubljana's), the establishment of air transport links with major European cities has greatly improved Zagreb's, and thereby Croatia's, position. Zagreb today has direct air links with approximately twenty European cities (daily flights to: Frankfurt, Munich, Amsterdam, Zurich, Vienna, Paris, Budapest, London, Warsaw, Prague, Sarajevo, Rome, Istanbul and Skopje, and seasonal flights to: Moscow, Brussels and Tel Aviv), so it participates in European air traffic to a considerable degree ([www.zagreb-airport.hr](http://www.zagreb-airport.hr)).

The distance in kilometers between Zagreb and certain European cities indicates its contact position, precisely where Central and Southeastern Europe meet. This can be concluded from the almost equal distance between Zagreb and the larger cities of Central or Western Europe (in the broader sense) on one side, and Southeastern and Eastern Europe on the other. Zagreb is therefore approximately the same distance from Budapest, Vienna or Venice as it is from Sarajevo or Belgrade; the same applies to Zurich, Milan or Rome, and then Tirana or Skopje; Warsaw, Frankfurt, Berlin, and Bucharest or Sofia; Amsterdam and Copenhagen, and Athens and Istanbul, Barcelona, and Minsk or Kiev, and so forth. (Fig. 1).

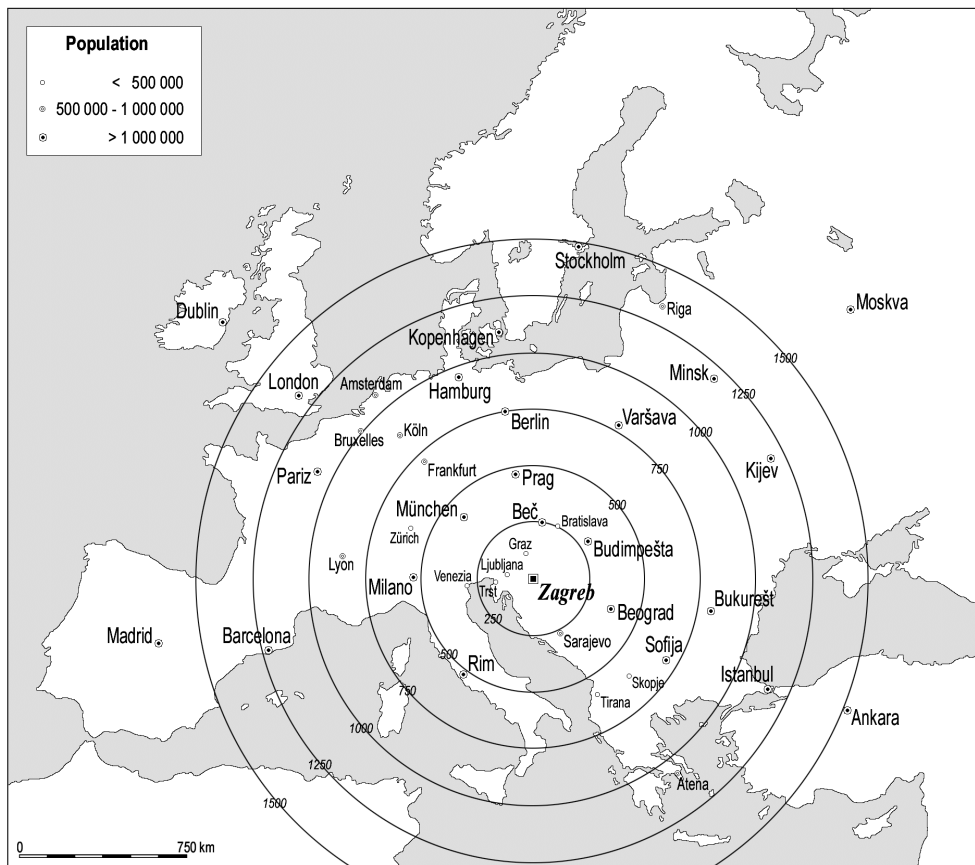
Zagreb's advantageous geographic position and its transit exploitation are particularly important developmental factors in the modern age and the era of globalization. Over the last ten years since Croatia gained independence, the introduction of a market economy has ushered in the entry of foreign capital, so numerous foreign firms have opened branches in Zagreb, deepening Zagreb's ties with other European cities. The opening of shopping centers by foreign retail organizations (e.g. Metro, Mercatone, Billa, Mercator) has had a particular impact on the transformation of the urban landscape, mainly in the city's periphery. However, such an opening of markets has also had negative consequences, one of the most marked being the sale of shares in state-owned institutions to foreign partners and the partial loss of their Croatian identity.

## ZAGREB IN CROATIA

The growth of Zagreb's importance in the international context has logically also meant growth in its significance at the national level. This is reflected in a comparison of demo-

graphic development in Zagreb and in Croatia's remaining three macro-regional centers: Split, Rijeka and Osijek. During the 1991-2001 period, the differences between these cities and Zagreb grew. Despite the slight drop in Zagreb's population, the ratio between it and the country's second largest city, Split, grew from 1:3.7 (1991) to 1:3.9 (2001); the ratio between Zagreb and Rijeka went from 1:4.2 to 1:4.8, while the ratio between Zagreb and Osijek went from 1:6.7 to 1:7.5 (Njegać, Nejašmić, 2002). Therefore, the ranking of size of Croatian cities is even more lopsided than ten years ago, and indicates increasing mono-centrism. This is occurring even as Croatia as a whole is experiencing depopulation, a problem affecting almost every region in Croatia, including the urban regions of large cities, with the exception of the Zagreb urban region (growth from 940,000 to 970,000 residents). The share of the Zagreb urban region's population in Croatia's overall population thus grew from 19.6% (1991) to 22.1% (2001). Given the present developmental trends, Zagreb and its urban region today stand out as the explicit Croatian core region (Njegać, Nejašmić, 2002).

Figure 1: Distance by air between Zagreb and larger European cities



The Zagreb urban region was formed over the last forty years, when the city influenced a process of suburbanization in its environs, thereby altering its socio-economic characteristics from rural to urbanized. Since the 1960s, when the process of suburbanization began, the population of Zagreb itself grew more slowly, while its environs experienced more rapid demographic growth. Thus the population of satellite settlements during the 1991-2001 period grew 16% (from 103,300 to 119,800), while Zagreb's population in the most recent period (1991-2001) actually experienced a slight drop (2.1%, from 706,800 to 691,700), which corresponds to trends in the world's developed countries. However, this decentralization was only recorded in the demographic rather than economic sense, since the city accommodates approximately 75% of the urban region's residents, even though 90% of them work in Zagreb.

Besides Zagreb, its satellite settlements have a particular importance within the urban region: Zaprešić, Samobor, Velika Gorica, Sesvete and Dugo Selo. They are arranged in a semicircular pattern within a distance of less than 20 km from the city limits, have between 8,880 and 44,914 inhabitants and are experiencing steady population growth (Nejašmić, 1994). Sesvete is particularly characteristic in terms of fast growth and intense construction; until World War II it was a small settlement (a population of about 800 in 1948), while today it is physically connected with Zagreb and has a population of 44,914.

Zagreb's importance grew in particular after Croatia obtained independence in 1991. Zagreb then became the political center of a new state, which led to the further intensifying of its functions and the widening of gaps between it and other cities. Its geographic position, transit accessibility, highly concentrated population, high degree of urbanization and dynamic economic growth (especially tertiary activities) all contributed to this considerably.

## INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

Zagreb's advantageous geographic position, given the specific conditions of its historical and geographic development, has not been exploited in the best manner up to this point. Together with the already-mentioned aspect of Croatia's lack of political independence and Zagreb's second-rate international importance, an additional factor has been the lack of any stronger influence exerted by Zagreb on the wider region. This influence was particularly curtailed toward the west, due to the relative confinement of the socialist system and non-integration in market economic trends. After this factor was overcome at the beginning of the 1990s, Croatia was stricken by war, which slowed the country's overall economic growth, including that of Zagreb – even though the city itself was not directly hit by the war. All transit flows of the time, which had their shortest and most natural routes from the Danubian basin toward the Adriatic Sea precisely through Zagreb, moved farther north, through Slovenia, while Zagreb was left on the sidelines. This was actually characteristic for Croatia as a whole, with the most visible case being Rijeka and its port. Once it was the most important port in the former Yugoslavia, but it lost its primacy in port traffic to the port of Koper. The favorable predisposition of Zagreb will be difficult to exploit in the near future, since as of May 1 this year Croatia will be relegated even deeper into Europe's periphery as its neighbors become European Union member states. In this context, Zagreb must

foment even closer links with other European cities and thereby extend its commercial and other ties with them, so that it, and all of Croatia, can be as well prepared as possible to join the EU once the time comes. Until then, Zagreb will remain a contact hub, bordering the European Union, having the same status that Ljubljana or Budapest have had until now.

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